



UNITED PRESS INTERNATIONAL

9/11 report: No Iraq link to al-Qaida

By Shaun Waterman

UPI Homeland and National Security Editor

Published 7/23/2003 7:48 PM

[View printer-friendly version](#)

WASHINGTON, July 23 (UPI) -- The report of the joint congressional inquiry into the suicide hijackings on Sept. 11, 2001, to be published Thursday, reveals U.S. intelligence had no evidence that the Iraqi regime of Saddam Hussein was involved in the attacks, or that it had supported al-Qaida, United Press International has learned.

"The report shows there is no link between Iraq and al-Qaida," said a government official who has seen the report.

Former Democratic Georgia Sen. Max Cleland, who was a member of the joint congressional committee that produced the report, confirmed the official's statement.

Asked whether he believed the report will reveal that there was no connection between al-Qaida and Iraq, Cleland replied: "I do ... There's no connection, and that's been confirmed by some of (al-Qaida leader Osama) bin Laden's terrorist followers."

The revelation is likely to embarrass the Bush administration, which made links between Saddam's support for bin Laden -- and the attendant possibility that Iraq might supply al-Qaida with weapons of mass destruction -- a major plank of its case for war.

"The administration sold the connection (between Iraq and al-Qaida) to scare the pants off the American people and justify the war," said Cleland. "What you've seen here is the manipulation of intelligence for political ends."

The inquiry, by members of both the House and Senate

intelligence committees, was launched in February last year amid growing concerns that failures by U.S. intelligence had allowed the 19 al-Qaida terrorists to enter the United States, hijack four airliners, and kill almost 3,000 people.

Although the committee completed its work at the end of last year, publication of the report has been delayed by interminable wrangles between the committees and the administration over which parts of it could be declassified.

Cleland accused the administration of deliberately delaying the report's release to avoid having its case for war undercut.

"The reason this report was delayed for so long -- deliberately opposed at first, then slow-walked after it was created -- is that the administration wanted to get the war in Iraq in and over ... before (it) came out," he said.

"Had this report come out in January like it should have done, we would have known these things before the war in Iraq, which would not have suited the administration."

The case that administration officials made that al-Qaida was linked to Iraq was based on four planks.

Firstly, the man suspected of being the ringleader of the Sept. 11 hijackers, Mohammed Atta, was supposed to have met with an Iraqi intelligence official in Prague, the capital of the Czech Republic, in April 2001. But Czech intelligence - the original source of the report - later recanted, and U.S. intelligence officials now believe that Atta was in the United States at the time of the supposed meeting.

The Iraqi official, Ahmed Khalil Ibrahim Samir al-Ani is now in U.S. custody.

Secondly, U.S. officials said Iraq was harboring an alleged al-Qaida terrorist named Abu Mussab al-Zakawi.

But the government official who has seen the report poured scorn on the evidence behind this claim.

"Because someone makes a telephone call from a country, does not mean that the government of that country is

complicit in that," he told UPI.

"When we found out there was an al-Qaida cell operating in Germany, we didn't say 'we have to invade Germany, because the German government supports al-Qaida.' ... There was no evidence to indicate that the Iraqi government knew about or was complicit in Zakawi's activities."

Newsweek magazine has also reported that German intelligence agencies - having interrogated one of Zakawi's associates - believed that Zakawi was not even an al-Qaida member, but headed a rival Islamic terror group.

Thirdly, defectors provided to U.S. intelligence by the then-exiled opposition group, the Iraqi National Congress, said that Islamic terrorists had been training to hijack airliners using a disused plane fuselage at a camp in Salman Pak in Iraq.

"My understanding was that there was an alternate explanation for that," said the government official, suggesting that that they were doing counter terrorism training there. "I'm not saying that was the explanation, but there were other ways of looking at it."

Fourthly, officials have cited a series of meetings in the 1980's and 1990's between Iraqi officials and al-Qaida members, especially in Sudan.

Former CIA counter-terrorism analyst Judith Yaphe has questioned the significance of this data, "Every terrorist group and state sponsor was represented in Sudan (at that time)," she said recently, "How could they not meet in Khartoum, a small city offering many opportunities for terrorist tÃ¢te-Ã - tÃ¢tes."

The government official added that the significance of such meetings was unclear: "Intelligence officials, including ours, meet with bad guys all around the world every day. That's their job. Maybe to get information from them, maybe to try and recruit them.

"There are a series of alternative explanations for why two people like that might meet, and that's what we don't know."

He went on to suggest that the conclusions drawn from the information about the Sudan meetings was indicative of a wider-ranging problem with the administration's attitude to intelligence on the alleged Iraq al-Qaida link.

"They take a fact that you could draw several different conclusions from, and in every case they draw the conclusion that supports the policy, without any particular evidence that would meet the normal bar that analytic tradecraft would require for you to make that conclusion," he concluded.

Copyright © 2001-2003 United Press International

[View printer-friendly version](#)

Copyright © 2001-2003 United Press International. All rights reserved.

[Home](#) | [Products](#) | [Photos](#) | [About](#) | [Contact](#) | [Press](#) | [Terms](#)